THE FUTURE SPATIAL DIRECTIONS

Urban Structure as a Strategic Tool

This section presents a number of strategic options based upon the analysis of urban structure and morphology undertaken so far.

It is not meant to provide all the answers, or indeed offer a comprehensive spatial vision, but merely present a number of potential spatial directions – directions which could shape and inform a long-term spatial vision for the borough, based upon the foundations of urban structure and urban design.

There are three spatial directions presented, each one displaying an alternative urban-structure approach and linking in to development outcomes such as land uses.

Spatial Strategy A is the direction which has proved most appropriate based on the current evidence, and is therefore at present the preferred option. Further testing needs to be undertaken to see if this direction is viable.

There are also a number of over-arching, generic spatial structure recommendations which [...?]. Many of these flow out of the urban structure analysis and follow the general principle of needing to once more put the pedestrian at the heart of the city. Only by achieving this are we going to tackle the bigger issues: social exclusion, unviable town centres, inactive lifestyles, car dependency, and so on.
Mixed-use intensity everywhere could be viable option, given the level of growth and change that will occur across the borough. Hence, this option explores the possibility of allowing high- to medium-intensity development across the borough, utilising the path network and its hierarchy as a means to organise the structure of the urban fabric. Places in the east would become as dense, intense and urban as the places in the historically more urbanised west.

It might culminate in high-intensity mixed-use urban quarters across the borough, with shops and services – wherever they are needed and demanded, and where development can provide them – linked to movement routes. This direction would lead to key services and social infrastructure being located on a development opportunity basis, rather than focusing such key services within centres.
RECOMMENDED SPATIAL STRATEGY

Refocusing on our urban centres

This approach focuses on discovering and recovering the lost centres and places of Tower Hamlets by utilising proactive planning tools.

To generate and foster a “sense of place”, to begin the process of placemaking, requires an understanding of the people that make places. Without people, activity, energy, movement, trade, and so on, there would be no place, only space: empty, soulless, dead, inhospitable space.

As discussed previously, post-war planning methodology set about moving people out of places, de-intensifying the activities that made these places unique, and gave them a sense of place. This process needs to be reversed, and above all, the qualities that made them good places need to be reinstated.

We need to begin shaping the form and spatiality of Tower Hamlets. This is not an end-state but a continuous succession of phases (from individual buildings, to wider regeneration projects). These small parts need to come together to make a greater city form, a visual order that reinforces the places that make up Tower Hamlets.

The Core Strategy needs to set down new urban connections between existing centres, and where new activity nodes are formed, set about creating some new centres. For example, at the junction of St Paul’s Way and Bow Common Lane, a new centre can be developed, creating a focus on Bow Common.

We need to reinstate the things that bring a city to life: a mix of uses, people, and activities. These urban qualities are valued; people go to places that have these qualities and desert places that do not.

What should be in our centres, and what form should they take?

A whole range of uses should be promoted within an urban centre. It should be the primary location for social and community infrastructure, such as libraries, museums, cultural buildings, and health centres, as well as a range of commercial and retail uses, all in close proximity to one another, so as to create multiple connections and support for each other. Key Civic buildings should be placed to frame key public spaces, helping to build civic pride.

What would happen outside of the urban centres?

As you move further away from the centre, the character of an area becomes more and more residential. The intensity of activity diminishes and the density decreases.

There needs to be a network of local urban centres, which are overlapped by neighbourhood urban centres and district urban centres, supported by a number of major centres. These centres will offer a variety of shops and services related to their position in the hierarchy.

The larger scale centres will be linked and connected by a number of linear, mixed-use streets that focus activity and key civic uses, developing and reinforcing the traditional English high street.
OVER-ARCHING SPATIAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Delivering spatial planning

Through this study of the urban structure and form of Tower Hamlets, a series of factors have been bought to light.

The following 36 recommendations begin to act as pointers for future spatial planning in Tower Hamlets. They are not exhaustive in scope, but attempt to ensure that future planning tools within the Local Development Framework understand and embed local distinctiveness, spatiality, good urban design, and support place identity.

1 Turn orange (vehicle only) routes into multifunctional main streets in a similar way to Commercial Street, Bow Road, etc. Integrate and prioritise the pedestrian on these movement routes; make them mixed-use urban roads, etc. Integrate and prioritise the pedestrian on main streets in a similar way to Commercial Street, bow Turn orange (vehicle only) routes into multifunctional identity.

2 Focus and prioritise pedestrian and cyclist movement along key routes, connecting our urban centres to one another via human-focused streets. (Link in with the “legible London” programme and cycling and walking transformation programme led by the Mayor and TfL.)

3 Promote a compact urban form which responds to the urban hierarchy

4 Promote an integrated, flexible, mixed-use approach – with the levels of mix responding to access and location to centres, with the ability for the mix to change over time – giving an area the freedom to evolve and change, and create suitable circumstances without undue planning intervention.

5 Promote access to the rest of the city via strategic routes: principally by public transport, bike and foot, and to promote local connectivity based on the pedestrian and the cyclist.

6 Promote a highly walkable, people-friendly, memorable and enjoyable public realm that offers a multitude of urban pleasures and experiences.

7 Insist on, and promote, a high-quality of design in buildings and the public realm.

8 Promote a mixed-tenure approach to urban living to ensure the creation of socially balanced places.

9 Revise and raise residential space standards in order to ensure that high-density living is seen as an attractive option for all.

10 Acknowledge boundary blurring, and reject outdated zoning practices.

11 Focus civic, social and community buildings on to major routes and spaces to improve access, create a civic setting and bring activity to public spaces.

12 Promote active frontages along major routes and spaces.

13 Promote an integrated, coherent approach to building heights and density, responding to proximity of centres.

14 Parks should be integrated with the neighbourhood and the movement network that operates across the neighbourhood. Through movement should be encouraged and made clear, safe and direct.

15 Create a network of large and small public spaces across the borough to offer places for local people to meet and interact. These spaces should be located where pedestrian activity is substantial to ensure they are lively, not dead, public spaces. The clustering of shops, cafés and other uses around these spaces can help enliven activity.

16 Ensure that buildings frame and address the public-realm network, rather than turning their backs on it, as has happened in the past.

17 The public front of buildings needs to face the street and, as much as possible, have active edges. This can be achieved by front doors, windows, balconies and terraces, and ensures the public realm remains active and overlooked.

18 Connect the key public spaces in the borough to high-quality streets that enable people to move around on foot quickly, easily and with enjoyment. Some of these key connections could be pedestrianised, as long as they have enough activity along them to keep them safe.

19 Use and locate strategic landmarks in urban centres, major nodes and/or along primary paths to reinforce the perception of centre and edge. Strategic landmarks should complement each other and not fight for visual dominance.

20 New small nodes need to be created, which will only occur when parts of the local level path network are repaired and reinstated as recommended in R1. These smaller nodes can act as local focal points, maybe with a few local shops.

21 Ensure most green spaces are edged by buildings that offer active edges and overlooking, to assist in creating lively, well-used and safe parks.

22 To reinstate paths that have been cut due to post-war redevelopment. This can be done by:
   • returning to the traditional street pattern of joined-up paths
   • promoting the qualities of a permeable area which offers a choice of routes for people

23 To reinforce paths based on the role in the movement hierarchy so they can be easily distinguished and understood by citizens. This can be done by:
   • adjusting the width and enclosure of the path
   • use of active frontages and edges
   • developing a sense of character for each path
   • limiting large set backs and empty spaces along the path.
Parks should offer space for biodiversity and nature and link into the water network where possible. Green connections between green spaces should be created in a joined-up network.

Where possible, attempt to integrate users not segregate them, putting pedestrians – the most vulnerable users – as top priority. Integrating users ensures each path has enough activity to feel safe and overlooked.

Utilise the canal network as a multipurpose route. This can be done by:
- promoting it as a movement route for pedestrians and cyclists
- enhancing biodiversity on the network and along its edge, promoting it as a place for nature
- focusing activities, such as restaurants, cafés, and shops, along its edge, where appropriate
- ensuring buildings along its edge address the canal and promote overlooking of the space to improve safety.

Reconnect a mix of uses between the public transport nodes and the main movement routes, which hold most pedestrian activity. This can be done by focusing mixed-use, higher-density activity around the public transport node and the area between where the existing mix of uses occur.

Focus new centres around good access to public transport, this could mean for a large centre located around a tube or DLR station and for a smaller centre located along a busy secondary route which has a bus service along it. This will make sure that centres are easily accessible both by foot, bike and public transport allowing people a multitude of ways to access them.

Reinforce nodes to improve their role as meeting places. This can be done by:
- using built form to highlight these nodes
- concentrating activities at these nodes
- ensuring a high level of public relevance of buildings and activities that frame the nodes

Break up some of the big blocks into smaller blocks helping to improve permeability by reinstating the traditional street network. This will help to make places more walkable and remove the large barriers to movement that many of the housing estates create.

Assist in developing vibrant, mixed-use centres and promote smaller block sizes in the centre of places. This will create more development edge and will encourage more shops and services to operate and take advantage of the higher concentrations of pedestrian activity.

Use markers (local landmarks) at appropriate locations along paths to reinforce their legibility and enable the user to know where they are along a path, and where they are going.

Direct building heights to increase gradually from the edge to the centre of a neighbourhood. The scale of the increase will differ from place to place. It might mean three storeys increasing to seven in one centre, and be higher or lower than this in another.

Reconnect to the River Thames, making use of the edge it offers. This can be done by:
- improving physical and visual access to the river
- focusing activities and uses along its edge so as to encourage people to go and enjoy the space
- look into the feasibility of new pedestrian footbridges across the Thames to connect north-east and south-east London

Make use of the railway lines and arches. This can be done by:
- overcoming them as barriers by creating new connections over and under them
- using the arches as spaces for business and other uses
- promoting their role as places of rich biodiversity thereby leaving some parts of them for nature, and restricting human access.

Better define the public-realm network by using buildings to frame the space instead of large swathes of under-used open space. Put such space in the internal private area of blocks and locate buildings along the edge of blocks with their public fronts addressing the street.
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